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When the Senate Judiciary Committee began its work last week on an immigration reform bill, it faced pressure from interest groups not to follow the House's lead. These groups have ratcheted up their rhetoric to an extreme - even by Washington's standards - calling the bill "hysterical," "un-American," "devastating," and an "atrocity."

And, the kicker: this extreme language isn't coming from Moveon.org or other left-wing Web sites but from several prominent religious leaders who have said the House's reform bill [the House last month passed legislation to tighten border controls and force employers to confirm the legal status of their workers]violates church teaching. Washington's Roman Catholic Cardinal McCarrick claimed the bill is contrary to "what the Lord told you to do," and Los Angeles' Cardinal Roger Mahony even said he would order priests to break the law, should the bill be enacted.

Such a reaction is itself by definition hysteria and further spreads misinformation about what the House-approved bill does, and it gives a misimpression of where most people of faith stand on fixing our broken immigration system.

Cardinal Mahony's interpretation aside (he said on Ash Wednesday that "every single person who comes up to receive Holy Communion [would be asked]to show papers"), the House's bill does not substantially change decades of law with respect to churches. From 1986 until recently, no organization was allowed to conceal, harbor or shield an alien from law enforcement "in reckless disregard of the fact" that the alien is here illegally. No church has been shut down for operating a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter or providing any other basic social service to an illegal alien. The burden isn't and shouldn't be on the church to screen parishioners for their legal status.

The truth is that the monstrous bill that these religious leaders are protesting doesn't exist.

The bipartisan immigration reform bill was passed with 36 Democrats - a feat for any bill in the politically polarized House of Representatives. The House bill takes several important steps to secure our country while leaving churches alone. It calls for the construction of a security fence along our southern border, requires federal and local law enforcement to cooperate on immigration matters, and mandates that employers use an instant-check system to verify the legal status of their employees.

The bill's common-sense solutions are supported by a large majority of Americans, including people of faith, such as ourselves. Religious leaders do everyone a disservice when they oversimplify one of the most complex issues before Congress and start misrepresenting the intentions of those of us who are working to improve our system.

The sides can't be described simply as "pro-faith" and "anti-faith" or "justice for immigrants" and "injustice for immigrants," as the official Catholic campaign implies. After all, that vision of justice ignores the legitimate security and economic concerns of American citizens and the law-abiding immigrants who came here the right way. What do the leaders of this movement say to working Americans who have seen their wages depressed by massive illegal immigration? Is amnesty justice for legal immigrants who waited years and spent their savings to abide by our laws?

Reasonable people on both sides of the debate recognize the great injustice our current system does to illegal immigrants. It is illegal to enter the United States without our government's permission, and we employed thousands of Border Patrol agents to apprehend nearly 1.1 million illegal aliens last year alone. But, at the same time, the government does not prosecute employers who hire illegal aliens.

Those jobs lure migrants to cross the treacherous desert where, annually, more than 400 meet their deaths.

We believe that amnesty would do nothing to remedy this problem, as prospective illegal immigrants would continue coming in the hope of yet another future amnesty.

We believe that the House bill takes a reasonable, balanced approach by prosecuting violator employers, putting up physical barriers on our border and cutting off incentives for illegal immigrants to enter our country in the first place.

Hysterical rhetoric - from the Catholics Church, of all places - does nothing to help make our immigration system more just.